

SLP (Studios La Pointe) College

Inspection of colleges in the Dance and Drama Awards

Inspection report

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Main findings

Course: Three-year National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre

Overall effectiveness: Good (grade 2)

Date of inspection: 21 October 2008

This feedback contains findings from the inspection visit. It draws on the evidence available from performance data, external and internal reviews, other available documentation and interviews held on the day.

The musical theatre course was previously inspected by Ofsted in February 2005 when it was graded good (grade 2) for achievement and standards and the quality of education and training. At the same time, the leadership and management of the college were also graded good (grade 2).

Standards

Recent reports produced by Trinity College London confirm the college's view that the standard of students' work 'is good and improving'. In 2008, after watching the final year show, an assessor wrote: 'The calibre of the school is now very impressive... The performance from all the students was of a very high standard'. Another assessor thought that first year students in a jazz class 'acquitted themselves well... attacking the work with energy and purpose', while students in a second year ballet class were all reaching 'the technical standards necessary for a pass level'.

The rate of retention has risen since the last inspection, although at 75% there is still room for improvement. The college is keen to enrol more male students and young people from diverse backgrounds, and works hard to keep them. However, there is no analysis to show if this policy is having an impact on retention figures.

The students who stay are hard working and committed; all who complete the course gain the Trinity diploma. Their attendance is about 95%. Students understand the high levels of professionalism they will need. After a re-validation visit in 2008, the Trinity team wrote in its draft report: 'Students' work ethic, discipline and commitment are excellent... Students have a mature and openly questioning approach to their work'.

Trinity reports that students' employment destinations have improved considerably in the past few years. As far as can be ascertained, of 2008 graduates, about 35% now have agent representation and about 75% have worked in the performing arts industry since they left. Typically, SLP leavers work in cruise ships, commercial entertainment or television; since 2003, the college says three or four graduates

have appeared in the West End. Other recent destinations include a pop musical *Luv Esther*, *Santa Claus the Musical* at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham, and a Welsh tour of *Aladdin*.

Quality of provision

Trinity judges SLP a good provider of the National Diploma in Professional Musical Theatre. 'Assessment systems are rigorous and thorough and the standard of the students' work is good and improving... if the consistency of training continues the course could be excellent'.

In its own recent programme of class observations, the college graded all classes so far seen good or better, although judgements about individual teachers are not collated into any overall analysis or used to inform staff development. For their part, students value the skill and experience of their teachers as well as their flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of individuals. In 2008, the Trinity revalidation team described the relationship between teachers and students as 'positive and dynamic'. 'Overall most teaching observed was good and some teaching was outstanding.' The Trinity team thought feedback to students in classes was good, although on occasions teachers 'did not sufficiently direct the students as to how to improve their practice'.

Arrangements for the assessment of students are comprehensive, and thorough in their implementation. Formal assessments take place at three points in the year when students receive both written and verbal feedback from each of their subject teachers and negotiate personal targets and action plans. Students are encouraged to reflect upon their own performance, and some of their reflective writing is of a very high standard. The Trinity team described assessment processes as 'rigorous and transparent' with clear, simple criteria. As a result, students say they always know their level of attainment and what they need to do to improve.

The curriculum effectively meets the requirements of the industry with the three core elements of dance, singing and acting given equal prominence. According to Trinity, 'the course provision is good and continually improving'. As in 2005, the way the college adapts the timetable to cater for the needs of individual students is a significant strength. Students particularly value the wide range of subjects covered, not least those which prepare them for adult life more generally such as the input from the local police on personal safety. They also like the outreach work undertaken by the college when they have the chance to take productions into local schools and homes for the elderly. There are many more conventional opportunities for students to perform. End of year shows take place in a large local theatre, and in March, third year students mount a showcase at The Criterion in the West End. Contextual studies are outstandingly well organised and taught. The Trinity assessor judged students' work in this area to be at 'a very high level far in excess of the requirements of the Trinity criteria'.

The accommodation has improved dramatically since the last inspection, with classes previously held both on and off the main site now brought together in a new suite of high-quality, purpose built studios with full disabled access. In addition, there is a well-equipped gym. Students have access to the internet in a new computer suite and the appointment of the studios and circulation spaces is of a high standard. Many teachers are experienced professionals in some aspect of musical theatre and some work as freelance practitioners in their specialist fields. About 20% have teaching qualifications and the college is exploring ways of helping teachers who wish to acquire certification in post compulsory education and training. Carefully chosen guest practitioners complement the work of regular teachers.

Students' welfare is managed very effectively by an experienced member of staff. She and her team ensure that students have access to a range of support services and general advice. For example, there is physiotherapy should they need it, and advice on nutrition. All students have a termly tutorial which provides opportunities for a review of progress and a discussion about any difficulties they may be experiencing. Trinity noted excellent injury and illness tracking. The names of students who need special injury support appear daily in the staff room, colour coded so that teachers can see quickly the stage of the student's recovery. Learning support is good. Any additional needs are identified during the induction week and a student support tutor negotiates individual learning plans. Students are well prepared for entry into the profession, both in classes and through the disciplined ethos of the college.

Leadership and management

The strong team ethos noted by inspectors in 2005 remains a characteristic of the college management. Morale is high and staff and students report that SLP is a happy place to work. Teaching staff appreciate the annual appraisal meeting they have with the principal and the unobtrusive support she gives them in doing their jobs. A simple but effective management structure, where the principal and vice-principal lead a middle management team of heads of department and administrators, serves the college well. Trinity believes that there is 'a cohesive strategy to develop and enhance the course, which is being developed and implemented by the new senior team'.

There are good systems for collecting the views of staff and students and ensuring that they are taken into account when making decisions. Students like the system of year representatives and head boy and head girl and believe the college is responsive to feedback and prepared to make changes. For example, Latin American and ballroom classes were introduced as an option following representation from students.

Good attention is paid to equality of opportunity and to widening the intake. However, the college loses touch with most of its students a year or so after they leave so that records of graduate employment are not sufficiently complete to allow an accurate picture of SLP's students' subsequent employment profile to emerge.

The main instrument of quality assurance is the annual staff review meeting. Having prepared brief statements about their year's work, teachers participate in a debate about the strengths of the course and possible areas for development. The discussion is minuted and used to inform the self-assessment report. While this is a reasonable enough framework for course review, teachers' judgements are not always particularly searching and sources of evidence, such as records of student feedback and information about graduate employment, are not rigorously scrutinised. The self-assessment report is succinct and well organised with actions identified. It refers to suitable sources of evidence, like Trinity reports, but it relies too much on assertion and does not make enough use of the statistical evidence available in formulating key judgements about standards and jobs.

The college has taken action on some of the weaknesses from the 2005 inspection report. For example, development planning is now linked to self assessment. However, issues raised by external monitors are not systematically addressed in suitably monitored action plans with timescales and success criteria. For example, it is not clear how the college intends to tackle continuing problems with retention and employment records, both issues in the last Ofsted report, or the weaknesses in students' core strength noted by Trinity.

Points for action

The college must:

- develop the systems for recording and evaluating the jobs gained by past students so that the college can give a confident, comprehensive account of patterns of graduate employment over time
- ensure that self-assessment is informed by evidence-based judgements about the quality of outcomes
- ensure that suitably monitored action plans are created in response to external judgements about the quality of the provision.

Points for consideration

The college might usefully:

- continue to improve retention
- collate information from lesson observations to provide a profile of teaching and learning across the college.